

ADVISORY STATEMENT

BASSETT DISTRICT STEERING COMMITTEE REVIEW OF 425 W. WASHINGTON AVE. REDEVELOPMENT PROPOSAL

Introduction.

Below is a summary of the outcomes of the Bassett District steering committee meetings of May 8, May 15, June 5, and June 24, 2013, regarding Mr. Eric Minton's proposal for 425 W. Washington Avenue. A July 11th follow-up neighborhood meeting at Capitol Lakes auditorium was also held, attended by Alder Verveer and Kevin Firchow of City Planning. The committee met with Mr. John Sutton of Sutton Architects, representing the development team. While the committee supports the overall intent of this project, it is necessary to highlight neighborhood issues and concerns that need to be addressed by the developer, the neighborhood, and relevant city review authorities as this project is considered for approval.

Discussion of Issues and Concerns

2012 Downtown Plan Implementation.

This committee carries an added responsibility since this project may well be the "template" for all future projects in the 400/500 blocks of W. Washington under the new Downtown Plan (DP). "Bassett Recommendations, Objective 4.5" of the DP calls for "an evolving mix of new higher-density buildings carefully integrated with existing older structures that are compatible in scale and character". Also, the DP for W. Washington stresses "the grand appearance created by consistent building setbacks, wide terraces, and large canopy trees, and these features should be maintained as public amenities as redevelopment occurs."

Yet the new DP's "concept drawings" for the 400/500 blocks anticipate a near-monolithic progression of five and six-story buildings with minimum separation between structures. Only a handful of historically significant residences at Broom St. and W. Washington (SW corner) are shown as surviving this transition. Whether such changes are beneficial or harmful to the neighborhood's character is debatable, but the 425 W. Washington project will set the tone for future developments along this highly visible, tree-lined, Capitol gateway corridor.

Zoning, Massing, and Setback.

The steering committee's understanding is that the use of the Planned Development approach for this proposal is being driven by the proposed commercial uses which are not permitted within the current DR2 zoning. Residents are supportive of the proposed commercial uses for this site, an optometrist and a fitness center, one of which has operated on this site for many years.

However, the committee feels strongly that whatever method is chosen to accommodate these uses should not circumvent the underlying Design and Dimensional Standards associated with the current DR2 zoning district established for the 400 & 500 blocks of W. Washington Ave. This area was specifically separated in the Downtown Plan and the vision expressed there is most

aligned with the DR2 zoning district. The design, setback and massing standards are important elements in creating the vision described in the Downtown Plan.

In particular this proposal does not meet the rear yard setback requirement of the DR2 zoning. The requirement is for a minimum of 20% of the depth of the lot or 20' whichever is greater. The proposed rear yard setback is 20' versus the 33' requirement based on actual lot depth. If the first redevelopment in the W. Washington area under the new zoning and Downtown Plan is not compliant with the basic Design and Dimensional Standards then the vision for the area will be eroded and future proposals will likely follow suit in requesting variations from these recently adopted standards.

In fact most of the commercial uses that currently exist along these blocks are not identified as permitted or conditional uses for the DR2 district. The dental, optometry, real estate, and professional offices along with furniture sales, a coffee shop, and a financial institution currently operating on these parcels are non conforming within DR2.

The West Washington area is identified in the Downtown Plan as primarily a residential area with neighborhood serving mixed use occupancies. These are precisely the types of uses proposed by this application, yet the zoning district is out of line with the Downtown Plan.

The DR2 zoning district is used only for the West Washington, Bassett and Mifflin Districts. All three areas anticipate a range of commercial services mixed into these predominately residential areas. Going forward, continued use of spot zoning or planned development procedures is not conducive to achieving the overall unified goals of the Downtown Plan.

An alternative means of accomplishing these goals is to modify the zoning code to make the types of uses anticipated within these areas conditional uses in DR2 so that they can occur on sites which are suitable.

Architecture and Building Height.

Bassett District is a 2-4 story height neighborhood (see DP Recommendation 84). Appendix C of the DP identifies W. Washington Ave. ("Area C") as an area where up to two (2) additional stories may be allowed ". . . through the conditional use process if they meet specific criteria". Further, ". . . additional stories are to be used as a tool to encourage and reward buildings of truly exceptional design that respond to the specific context of their location and accomplish specific objectives defined for the area." (*emphasis added*).

The subject project demonstrates rather unexceptional features, and shows little, if any, awareness of its neighborhood context. The committee appreciates the 5th floor stepback as an effort to reduce the bulk and shadow impact of this structure. However, allowing such a "routine" design effort to automatically qualify for an extra story (5th floor) may set a precedent that is difficult to change. The steering committee must look to the UDC and Plan Commission for their expertise and input to find ways that the current design can be enhanced and better correlated with the neighborhood's character and gateway role. Such alterations will be

challenging, but are ultimately necessary to comply with the intent of the Downtown Plan's vision for W. Washington Avenue.

Historic Concerns.

This project adjoins smaller-scale frame and brick residences with porches, yards, and period architecture that define this portion of the Bassett/W. Washington neighborhood. The DP's Recommendation #88 states that a Neighborhood Conservation District should be considered "as identified in the Downtown Historic Preservation Plan." To date we are unaware of any actions that would serve to implement this recommendation. Once the 425 W. Washington project is underway, it may well be too late to overcome the momentum of future "lot-by-lot" project approvals if the goal of "preserving neighborhood character" is to be achieved.

Traffic, Parking, and Safety.

This is a high commuter traffic area with numerous activities both morning and night to draw visitors. Parking for events at Kohl Center, Overture Center, etc. place a premium on safe ingress/egress for vehicles and the resulting heavy pedestrian flows. The developer has carefully included on-site parking for residents and the staffs of the fitness center and Dr. Bonsett-Veals' office. However, clients of the fitness center will have no parking available and will be expected to walk, bike, or ride mopeds to the facility. This leaves automobile users to find street parking, when existing businesses already find customer parking to be very scarce. The committee recommends provisions be made for fitness center clients to use a limited number of on-site stalls, with appropriate time restrictions and access controls.

Economics.

Given that the 1st and 2nd floor commercial spaces are custom designed and fully committed for occupancy, the only issue is rental housing demand. Presently, new downtown apartment complexes have little difficulty finding tenants for units with upscale amenities. Building owners repeatedly cite the "Epic Effect" as a major driver, with young professionals seeking a downtown abode even while working in the suburbs. One future concern is how the two commercial spaces would be altered to accommodate changes in use should the proposed tenants vacate or go out of business. This could also create new zoning conflicts. Parking assignment plans would also be impacted.

Terrace Protection.

The developer's Tree Inventory and Tree Protection Plan dated 4/5/05, was provided to the committee. All 22 existing perimeter trees and 2 rear lot line trees will be removed. Mr. Sutton hopes to save a catalpa tree at the rear/center of the lot. A number of these trees have signs of disease or damage, yet they do provide canopy cover, habitat, and shade for the area. Two mature honey locust trees occupy the terrace. The committee strongly recommends including Section II (pp.3-4) of the Protection Plan in the plan submittal, requiring "fencing off" of the terrace trees. Further, we recommend the full terrace be fenced to preclude construction damage, to protect root structures and avoid soil compression. Mr. Sutton has stated that no construction activity (such as cranes) will require terrace tree trimming or removal for this project.

Signage.

The committee is comfortable with the monument signage concept, although its placement is in flux. Exterior warning and safety notice signs should also be designed and integrated early, rather than being purchased “over the counter”. UDC review of signage concepts, particularly a prohibition of any future marquees, should occur early in the process, and not as an afterthought.

Public Areas and Amenities.

The architect proposes a partial green roof adjoining a common area 5th floor roof terrace. Regarding roof terrace security, the committee has been repeatedly assured that key fob entry controls, security cameras to monitor activities, and a metal fence set back five (5) feet from the 42” parapet wall will be permanently in place. This is to prevent any interaction between terrace users and pedestrians or vehicles below on W. Washington. There will be no amplified music, and lighting glare will be controlled. Also, the roof terrace hours of use will not extend beyond the fitness center’s hours, so that a staff member is always present to monitor rooftop activities by video. At street level, the architect has promised striping and more esthetic screening of the moped and bike parking at the front of the project, to prevent a cluttered look near the entry. A small sideyard on the west will be available for tenant and staff seating.

Landscaping.

There will be a continuous border around the perimeter with a 9-ft. rear lawn. The committee has encouraged the maximum number and size of replacement trees, since there will be no preservation of the mature trees now on the site. The project will use city garbage/recycling services, resulting in at least eight (8) wheeled collection bins. The committee questions whether city collection bins and the proposed trash room will be sufficient to accommodate all trash and recycling for the building, especially during moveouts. The weekly round trip transport of all these bins across the terrace lawn may result in ruts and worn areas of a permanent nature. The developer needs to devise a solution to this potential eyesore.

Mechanicals and Lighting.

The mechanical equipment will be internal, except for several A/C compressors on the roof. Each apartment will have its own HVAC unit, with external grills. The committee has stressed the need to match the exhaust grill vents with the adjoining building finishes. Exterior lighting is to be designed for “dark sky” compatibility and reduced impact on neighboring sites.

Energy and Ecology. The apartments will have individual HVAC units. Hot water will be centrally sourced. The partial green roof (5th floor) is a welcome feature. Total loss of trees on site will only add to the urban warming trend.

Process. To date, the steering committee has received prompt and courteous communication from the architect and developer. The level of responsiveness to suggestions and the rapid updating of the preliminary drawings have been most helpful to these deliberations. We look forward to this level of transparency and professionalism as the review process continues.

Summary. The steering committee supports the growth of higher density mixed use projects in the Bassett district. More neighborhood oriented retail services along W. Washington can help existing merchants sustain their businesses and create the critical mass needed for greater foot traffic. The key elements for implementation that the steering committee recommends for the 425 W. Washington project are as follows:

1. Architectural enhancements to improve the structure's compatibility with the neighborhood's history, character and gateway context. (see DP; App. "C" extra height criteria)
2. Adhering to the rear lot setback dimensions (33') set forth in DR2 zoning.
3. Moving the roof's fire access stairs out of sight from the street.
4. Provide fitness center client automobile parking on site.
5. Permanent security controls for the 5th floor roof terrace with 5' setback from the 42" parapet wall. Restricted hours, video monitoring, and no amplified music or decorative lighting.
6. Plant the maximum number and size of landscape trees.
7. Provide garage/recycling bin transport plan protective of the terrace.
8. Landscape screening and striping of moped/bike parking areas.
9. Total fenced protection of the entire terrace prior to and during construction.

The 2012 Downtown Plan is now in effect. This project is the first on W. Washington Avenue to fall under the new criteria. The key issues of this project's design compatibility and setbacks need to be resolved. We expect the outcome of this complex review effort to determine the direction of W. Washington Ave. and the Bassett District's character and livability for many years to come.

Respectfully submitted,

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Bassett District, Capitol Neighborhoods